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SUBJECT: LIBERIA: IN WELL-RUN ELECTION, UNITY PARTY AND
INDEPENDENT CANDIDATES ADVANCE IN GBARPOLU BY-ELECTION

REF: MONROVIA 936

1. SUMMARY. Unity Party candidate J.S.B. Theodore Momo and independent candidate Armour Kanie Wesso will advance to round two of the Gbarpolu County by-election to replace the late Senator Samuel Tormetie on December 18. Two Embassy teams, along with UNMIL and several NGOs, observed round one December 4 and noted that the election was well run. The Liberian National Elections Commission (NEC) deserves particular credit as it took responsibility for much of the management and oversight (vs. UNMIL previously). The Liberian National Police (LNP) covered all the security needs of the election without the presence of UN officers. Voter turnout was 36%, larger than the previous legislative by-election, likely the result of President Sirleaf personally campaigning for her party's candidate. The only flaw was that some polling stations would not have had enough ballots for all of their registered voters had the turnout been larger (although observers were not aware of any actual shortages). NEC noticed the problem mid-day during round one and has already taken steps to avoid a repeat in round two.
END SUMMARY.

2. Two Embassy teams observed the first round of the Gbarpolu County by-election held December 4 to replace the late Senator Samuel Tormetie. Out of nine contenders, Unity Party candidate J.S.B. Theodore Momo won 39.1% of the vote and independent candidate Armour Kanie Wesso took 17.6%. Because no candidate received 50% plus one vote, a run-off between the top two will be held on December 18. Voter turnout was approximately 36% in round one, higher than NEC expected despite the fact many people had to walk hours to participate. Turnout was lower in the four previous legislative by-elections; only 21.2% of registered voters cast a vote the most recent election in July (reftel). This relatively high turnout, and the Unity Party's strong showing, is likely the result of President Sirleaf and VP Boakai personally campaigning in the county a week before the elections.

3. The Embassy teams visited 27 out of 90 polling stations and were impressed at how smoothly and transparently the election was run. They observed that all polls were fully staffed with trained election personnel. LNP officers kept the lines flowing orderly and showed no signs of interfering in the process. Voters at all polling stations had the right corner of their voter ID card cut off and their thumbnail dyed as they voted to prevent them from voting again. Vote counting was done systematically at each site immediately following the poll closure and the tally sheets were turned into the NEC. Candidate representatives monitoring the polling sites told the Embassy teams they were very satisfied with how closely election procedures were being followed. All sites the teams visited opened within ten minutes of the 8:00 AM start time and closed on time at 6:00 PM.

¶4. The only flaw the teams noted in the process was in the distribution of ballots among the voting sites. Some sites had 1.5 times the number of ballots needed for their number of registered voters. Others had only half of what they needed had all voters assigned to their site turned out. However, there were no reports of any actual shortages of ballots. NEC officials acknowledged this discrepancy and were prepared to ferry ballots from one polling station to another during the day, though it was never necessary. NEC plans to correct the problem for the December 18 runoff.

¶5. Other observers -- including representatives from the National Democratic Institute, the International Republican Institute, UNMIL, UNDP, the Center for Democracy and Elections, and the International Foundation for Electoral Assistance -- shared our general impression that this election was transparent and very well run. They also found the election officials to be courteous, timely, and extremely attentive to electoral procedures. Most of them publicly expressed their congratulations to NEC as the vote tallies were first being counted the evening of December 4.

¶6. COMMENT: While partner support, including logistical (primarily airlift) support from UNMIL and donor financing, was still key to the successful election, this election is different from the four previous Liberian by-elections held over the past year in that the Liberian NEC was much more in the forefront, with partners remaining behind the scenes. Further, the LNP was responsible for all the security; there were no CIVPOL Officers at the polling stations. END COMMENT.
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